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ABSTRACT

Research has shown that teachers desire assistance from school psychologists in dealing with student problems. A study was conducted to determine how school psychologists respond to teacher requests for assistance. Members of the National Association of School Psychologists were mailed one of six descriptions of a student from a concerned teacher. There were two descriptions each of a student with academic problems, with behavioral problems, and with a combination of academic and behavioral problems. For each type of problem, one description was of a first-grader and one was of a fourth-grader. Psychologists also received a questionnaire in which they rated the problem's similarity to those with which they normally dealt and their ability to respond to the concern. Respondents' (N=227) identification of typical teacher concerns was consistent with the expressed concerns of teachers in a separate study, suggesting that school psychologists have a good knowledge of the priority concerns of teachers. Respondents identified the described problems as typical and reported being prepared to deal with them, listing several helpful responses and resources. Respondents were most likely to offer to help teachers by gathering more information. The most common resources reported were other persons, such as school personnel and parents. (Author/NB)

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School Psychologists' Responses To Academic and Behavioral Problems

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Running head: SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGISTS' RESPONSES

Abstract

This study examined the ways school psychologists reported that they respond to typical teacher concerns about students with academic and/or behavioral problems, and the resources they use to provide information and suggestions to teachers. Respondents' identification of typical teacher concerns was consistent with the expressed concerns of teachers in a separate study. School psychologists were most likely to offer to help teachers by gathering more information. The most common resources were other persons, such as school personnel and parents. Results were discussed in terms of the adequacy of school psychologists' responses to teacher concerns.

School Psychologists' Responses To

Academic and Behavioral Problems

Since its initial promotion in the 1960's, there has been a growing consensus among school psychologists, teachers, school administrators, and parents that consultation deserves a dominant position among school psychological services (Curtis & Meyers, 1985). A recent nationwide survey of school psychologists' activities (Smith, 1984) found that respondents spend, on the average, 18.81% of their time engaged in consultation, but would like to spend 22.98% providing this service.

A difficulty in determining the actual extent of consultation services, however, is the definition of what actually constitutes consultation. As Gutkin and Curtis (1982) noted, "Part of the problem is the term 'consultation' is used in so many contexts and in reference to so many different types of service relationships that the word has practically become devoid of meaning" (p. 796). In the school psychology literature, consultation may refer to everything from direct service to a child to organization development activities district wide (Meyers, Parsons, & Martin, 1979).

Perhaps part of the difficulty in defining

consultation activities is the lack of specific course work in consultation in many school psychology training programs. Meyers, Wurtz, and Flanagan (1981) found that 60% of the programs they surveyed did not offer a course focused exclusively on consultation. Thus, many school psychologists may be learning to do some version of consultation only after they are on the job.

In a national survey of elementary school teachers, McKellar and Hartshorne (1987) found the school psychologist to be strongly favored as the individual who can best help teachers answer questions about children for whom they have serious concerns. Thus, the current situation appears to be that teachers desire assistance from the school psychologist; that school psychologists provide some and wish to provide more consultation services, but are frequently untrained in consultation techniques; and that there is considerable confusion about what exactly constitutes consultation services. One might wonder exactly how school psychologists are responding to teacher requests for assistance.

The present study was designed to gather information about exactly what school psychologists say that they do to respond to teacher concerns. First,

what are the kind of concerns that school psychologists identify teachers as having? Second, with what kind of help do school psychologists respond to these concerns? Third, on what resources does the school psychologist rely in providing the assistance? It was hoped that answers to these questions would provide a picture of school psychological consultation with teachers as it is actually practiced in the field. Such a description of practice has implications for understanding the match between teacher concerns and school psychologist services, and thereby the evaluation of school psychological services. It also has implications for both pre-service and in-service training of school psychologists.

There is a possibility that school psychologists are better prepared to respond to some teacher concerns than others. For example, since Meyers, Wurtz, and Flanagan (1981) found that behavior modification was the most frequently taught consultation model, school psychologists might feel better prepared to deal with behavioral as opposed to academic problems. To the extent this is true, there might also be differences in their ability to respond to teachers at different grade levels. McKellar and Hartshorne (1987) found, for example, that first-grade teachers ask more

instructionally-related questions than fourth-grade teachers. A school psychologist who found such questions more difficult to answer than non-instructional questions might therefore have more difficulty consulting with a first-grade teacher. Thus, in addition to determining the manner in which school psychologists respond to teacher concerns, the present study examined the extent to which the responses varied by grade level and by the nature of the concern.

Method

Subjects

A questionnaire was mailed to 600 randomly selected members of the National Association of School Psychologists (N.A.S.P.). There were 227 questionnaires returned, for a 38% return rate. The return rate for each of the six experimental conditions ranged from 34 to 43 questionnaires. The percentages of questionnaires returned by geographic regions, as defined in the 1980 U.S. Census, were very similar to the percentages of N.A.S.P. members in these same geographic regions.

Materials

Six different descriptions of a student from a concerned teacher were used in the study to define the

six experimental conditions. These descriptions were adapted from information given by teachers in an earlier study (McKellar & Hartshorne, 1986). There were two descriptions each of a student with academic problems, with behavioral problems, and with a combination of academic and behavioral problems. For each type of problem or concern, one description was of a first-grade student and one was of a fourth-grade student. The student was called Kelly in all six descriptions and no pronouns were used in order to avoid indicating the sex of the described student.

On the questionnaire, respondents were asked to evaluate the described concern in two ways, (a) its similarity to those with which they normally deal and (b) their ability to respond to it. Respondents were asked to explain in their own words the ways in which they would help a teacher with the described concern and the resources on which they would rely. Finally, 15 questions were presented that were to be ranked as to the frequency with which the respondent consults with teachers on that type of question or issue. These questions represented 15 issues with which teachers in an earlier study (McKellar & Hartshorne, 1987) said they they would like assistance.

Procedure

Each potential respondent was mailed a letter inviting participation in the study, one of the six descriptions, the questionnaire, and a return envelope. Second requests for participation were sent to those who did not initially return their questionnaires.

Results

Characteristics of Respondents

The respondents were primarily field-based school psychologists (85%) with six or more years of experience (59%) as a school psychologist. About half (52%) had prior teaching experience. The most typical level of training (52%) was the Specialist's degree or something similar (C.A.S. or "Master's plus"). Fewer numbers of respondents held Master's degrees (22%) or doctorates (23%) as their highest level of training. The percentages of respondents servicing preschool, elementary, junior high/middle school, and high school populations were 44%, 85%, 71%, and 58%, respectively. Some respondents serviced more than one level. About half of the respondents (52%) served between one and three schools.

Appropriateness of Descriptions

Respondents ranked the student description on several 5-point Likert scales on which high ratings

were the most positive. The six descriptions of concerns used in the study were both familiar to the respondents and ones with which they felt able to assist teachers. All six described situations were rated as the types of concerns with which respondents would normally help a teacher and as somewhat to very similar (M = 4.36) to the concerns that prompt teachers to ask for their help. Respondents felt that their training and current skills enable them to respond fairly well to very well (M = 4.54) to the type of described teacher concern. They also felt fairly to very confident (M = 4.39) in their knowledge and skills necessary to deal with this type of concern. The respondents' evaluations of the descriptions did not differ significantly by experimental condition.

Types of Help and Resources

Respondents gave an average of six specific ways to help with the described concern and five resources that would be relied upon. These mean numbers of ways to help and resources did not differ significantly by the described concern sent to the respondents. The most common types of help were some form of discussion with the teacher to clarify the teacher's concern (19% of all ways to help), a psychodiagnostic evaluation (9% of all ways), behavioral observation of the student (8%

of all ways), and talking with the parents (8% of all

Insert Table 1 about here

ways). The most common resources the respondents relied on were other school personnel, not including the classroom teacher (25% of all resources), assessment instruments or procedures (12% of all resources), and the student's family or information about it (9% of all resources).

Insert Table 2 about here

The specific kinds of help given seemed to be of three general types: (a) gathering more information (e.g., review student's school records and/or gather background information), (b) making recommendations (e.g., suggest new teaching strategies/methods/techniques/materials), and (c) beginning the assessment process (e.g., have student discussed by child study team). The help responses were tallied within these three categories and then the number of responses in each category was analyzed in an analysis of variance (ANOVA) of the form, 2(Grade) X 3(Described Problem), to determine if the frequencies with which that type of

help was proposed varied by experimental condition.

Respondents were most likely to report helping by gathering more information. The mean number of examples of this type of help given by respondents was 3.61. The second most common form of help was to make recommendations ($\underline{M}$ = 1.28). There was not a significant difference in the number of suggestions to gather more information or to make recommendations depending on the student described, as defined by the respondent's experimental condition.

The least likely general approach for respondents to use to help was to begin the assessment process ($\underline{M}$ = .87). This category represented four specific types of help: having the student discussed by the child study team; conducting a psychodiagnostic evaluation; requesting a medical or neurological evaluation; and eliminating alternatives concerning the cause of the problem. In the ANOVA on this category of help, there was a significant main effect for the described problem, $\underline{F}(2,226) = 4.093$, $\underline{p}<.018$. Respondents were more likely to begin the assessment process if the student's problem was described as partially or completely academic in nature. Among the approximately six ways to help that each respondent gave, almost half the respondents (47%) gave the

specific help of conducting a psychodiagnostic evaluation. In an ANOVA of this specific help, similar in format to the one involving the general category of beginning the assessment process, the main effect for the described problem was also significant, $F(2,226) = 3.276$, $p<.040$. Thus, although beginning the assessment process was not the most typical way for school psychologists to respond to teachers' concerns, testing specifically and assessment in general were seen by respondents as more appropriate ways to help students with academic as opposed to behavioral problems.

Since the student descriptions sent to the respondents had varied as to the type of problem, academic, behavioral, or both, it was of interest to determine whether respondents tended to give instructionally- or behaviorally-oriented ways to help, depending upon the described problem. To make this comparison, the specific types of help of (a) analyzing the teacher's instructional strategies/methods/ techniques, (b) determining the student's learning style, ability level, and/or strengths and weaknesses, and (c) recommending new teaching strategies/methods/ techniques were grouped together as instructional assistance. The specific helps of (a) performing behavioral observation of the student, (b) recommending

behavioral management programs, and (c) instituting a program to improve the student's emotional well-being were labeled as behaviorally-oriented assistance. ANOVAs of the form, 2(Grade) X 3(Described Problem), were performed on these categories of instructional and behavioral help. In the ANOVA on instructional assistance, there were significant effects for the interaction ($F(2,226) = 14.494$, $p<.001$), Grade ($F(1,226) = 4.828$, $p<.029$), and Described Problem ($F(2,226) = 28.917$, $p<.001$). These results represented the respondents' preferences to offer instructional assistance when the problem was described as partially or totally academic, particularly when it was a first grader described as having a completely academic problem. The main effects for Grade ($F(1,226) = 4.234$, $p<.041$) and for Described Problem ($F(2,226) = 17.878$, $p<.001$) were significant in the ANOVA for behavioral help. Respondents were most likely to offer this type of assistance for first graders and for students whose problems were described as at least partially due to behavioral factors. Thus, respondents did tend to offer instructional assistance for academic problems and behavioral assistance for behavioral problems.

The resources upon which school psychologists said they would rely in responding to the problems of the

described student seemed to be of five general types: (a) personal resources (e.g., personal training/ knowledge); (b) other persons as resources (e.g., information from classroom teacher); (c) records or documentation (e.g., student's educational or psychological records); (d) published materials, instruments, or procedures (e.g., behavioral observation methods); and (e) programmatic interventions (e.g., services from outside agencies). The popularity of these resources were indicated by the mean number of resources per respondent given for each category: other persons as resources, $\underline{M}$ = 2.23; published materials, instruments, or procedures, $\underline{M}$ = 1.18; records or documentation, $\underline{M}$ = .49; programmatic interventions, $\underline{M}$ = .46, and personal resources, $\underline{M}$ = .42. ANOVAs of the form, 2(Grade) X 3(Desired Problem), on each of these categories failed to show that the probability of using any of these types of resources varied by experimental condition.

The general resources category of published materials, instruments, or procedures included the specific resource of assessment instruments or procedures, which was given at least once by 38% of all respondents. The probability of listing assessment as a resource tended slightly to increase as the student

population served by the the school psychologist increased, $r(208) = .154$, $p<.013$.

Consultation Issues

The mean rank ordering given by all respondents of the 15 questions representing consultation issues with teachers is given in Table 3. The lower the rank, the

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Insert Table 3 about here

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more frequently that issue emerges in consultation. In general, questions dealing with instruction of students (e.g., sequencing instruction, materials, methods) were ranked among the less frequently encountered consultation issues.

In a separate study (McKellar & Hartshorne, 1987), teachers were asked to describe a student about whom they had a great deal of concern and then to explain what information and suggestions they would want for dealing with this student. The questions that they posed were coded into categories that corresponded to the 15 ranked questions in the present study. For, example, in the teacher study, all questions related to the cause of the student's problem were coded similarly and in the present study of school psychologists, one of the 15 questions to be ranked concerned the cause of

the problem. The categories of coded questions in the teacher study were assigned rank values based on the overall frequencies with which that type of question was asked. These ranks were correlated with the ranks assigned by the school psychologists in the present study to the 15 corresponding questions. The resultant Spearman rho correlation coefficient of .531 was significant ($p<.042$), indicating that the school psychologists' perceptions of the relative frequencies with which they are asked these types of questions are similar to the relative frequencies with which teachers actually pose these questions. Also, the finding in the teacher study that instructionally-related questions were asked much less frequently than non-instructional questions supports the observation that the school psychologists tended to rank the instructional questions among the less frequently encountered consultation issues.

Discussion

Since school psychological consultation has been assigned diverse meanings in the literature, the focus of this study was the specific ways in which school psychologists respond to typical problems presented by teachers. An interesting finding was the confidence the respondents in this study had in dealing with

teacher concerns. Not only did they identify the described problems as typical, but overwhelmingly felt prepared to deal with them; and, were able to list several helpful responses and resources. If this is the case, then training programs and school psychologists may be doing an excellent job. On the other hand, school psychologists may have an inflated impression of the quality of their services. The analysis of the data would tend to support the former hypothesis.

In the first place, it is encouraging that the respondents tended to offer instructional assistance for academic problems and behavioral assistance for behavioral problems. In other words, they seem to be responding appropriately to the concern, rather than basing their responses on a single, stereotyped response (e.g., behavior modification for all problems).

The second piece of evidence supporting this interpretation is the rank order correlation between teacher concerns (McKellar & Hartshorne, 1987) and the respondents' assessment of how frequently they encounter particular concerns. The significant correlation would suggest that school psychologists have a good knowledge of the priority concerns of

teachers.

Finally, of interest had been any differences in the level of confidence with which school psychologists approach academic as opposed to behavioral problems as held by first versus fourth graders. No differences were found in this sample in the tendency of school psychologists to respond by gathering more information or by making recommendations when the concern varied in the type of student problem or grade level. This suggests these school psychologists were equally fluent in responding to both kinds of problems at either grade level.

Thus the school psychologists in this sample appear able to respond appropriately to teacher concerns, to correctly identify priority concerns among teachers, and to be fluent in their ability to respond to problems at different grade levels, whether academic or behavioral in nature. However, a major, although the smallest, category of response involved psychoeducational assessment. Almost half the respondents listed this as a specific help. Does this suggest an over-reliance on assessment as opposed to consultation?

One encouraging finding is that respondents were most likely to utilize assessment when the problem was

described as partially or completely academic in nature. Thus these school psychologists were making judgments concerning the appropriateness of assessment for the specific kind of problem presented. The choice of assessment for academic problems may be related to the nature of school psychologist's training, the nature of the assessment instruments school psychologists typically utilize, or the perception that specific assessment precedes any other kind of intervention with academic problems. There was, however, a tendency to increase the reliance on assessment as the student population increased, suggesting that consultation as a primary service may be related to the student per psychologist ratio.

Despite possible deficiencies in consultation training (Meyers, Wurtz, & Flanagan, 1981), the school psychologists in this study appeared to be confident in their ability to identify and respond to teacher concerns, and there would appear to be a good match between teacher concerns and the services offered, at least from the perspective of the school psychologist. Future studies might address this from the teachers' perspective. To what extent do teachers see school psychologists responding to their concerns by gathering additional information, making recommendations, or

beginning the assessment process? Do they feel the psychologist has adequate preparation and/or background to respond appropriately and expertly?

The responses given by the school psychologists as reported in this study might be further investigated by considering more specifically the ways the psychologist believes the responses they make help to solve the teacher's problem. How, for example, does classroom observation help the teacher and ultimately the child? Under what circumstances would the school psychologist choose the response of classroom observation? While the results of the present study are supportive of school psychological services, particularly when combined with McKellar and Hartshorne's (1987) finding that the school psychologist is a popular resource for teachers, it remains important to identify what variables increase the likelihood that the assistance offered by school psychologists actually contributes to satisfactory solutions to teachers' concerns.

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Table 1

Frequencies of Ways to Help

Types of Help	Frequencies[a]
Gather more information	59.6%
Discuss with teacher to gather more information	17.8%
Have teacher gather more information	1.7%
Determine prior interventions	2.5%
Analyze teacher's instructional methods	0.5%
Examine student's work samples	1.4%
Evaluate classroom environment	2.2%
Behavioral observation of student	8.3%
Talk with parents to gather information	8.3%
Interview student	3.4%
Determine student's strengths and weaknesses	3.1%
Talk with other school personnel	2.9%
"Informal assessment" of student	0.7%
Review student's records and background	6.8%
Make recommendations	21.1%
Suggest new teaching approach(s)	7.3%
Recommend behavioral management program	7.4%

(table continues)

Types of Help	Frequencies[a]
Recommend program to improve student's emotional health/social skills	1.5%
Follow-up on interventions	2.1%
Recommend classroom environment changes	0.8%
Suggest unspecified intervention	2.0%
Begin assessment process	14.4%
Have student discussed by child study team	2.0%
Conduct psychodiagnostic evaluation	9.2%
Medical or neurological evaluation	1.6%
Eliminate certain alternatives concerning cause of problem	1.6%

[a] All frequencies are based on total of 1377 ways to help given by respondents.

Table 2

Frequencies of Resources Used to Help

Resources	Frequencies[a]
Other persons	44.8%
Classroom teacher	5.2%
Other school personnel	25.0%
Parents	8.9%
Student	2.4%
Non-school individuals	2.7%
Peers	0.6%
Published materials, instruments, or procedures	23.8%
Behavioral observation/treatment methods	7.3%
Tests/assessment instruments	11.5%
Texts/films/tapes	5.0%
Records or documentation	10.0%
Work samples	1.6%
Student's educational records	1.8%
Student's psychological records	0.3%
Student's health/medical records	1.7%
Student's records (unspecified)	4.6%

(table continues)

Responses

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Resources	Frequencies[a]
Programmatic interventions	9.2%
Educational programs or special services	4.2%
Special education	0.4%
Counseling for student and/or parents	1.2%
Services from outside agencies	2.4%
Tutoring	1.0%
Personal resources	8.4%
Experience/personal resources (unspecified)	4.3%
Consultation skills	1.1%
Interviewing skills	0.6%
Experience with similar cases	0.4%
Academic training/knowledge	2.0%

[a] All frequencies are based on total of 1130 resources offered by respondents.

Table 3

Frequency of Questions Encountered in Consultation

Ranks	Questions
1	What abilities does the child have (either in general or in a specific subject area)?
2	What is the cause of the child's problem?
3	What class or educational program does this child belong in?
4	What kind of discipline techniques might work with this child?
5	Are there additional resources that might be appropriate for the child?
6	Does the child have the prerequisite skills to learn the material?
7	How do I work with a child with these values or emotional difficulties?
8	What instructional activities might be best for the child (e.g., peer tutoring)?
9	What is the child's background (e.g., health, educational record, family situation)?

(table continues)

Ranks	Questions
10	How can I get the parents or other significant people involved?
11	What should I be trying to teach the child?
12	Would the child learn best from a particular method (e.g., phonics)?
13	Which instructional materials should I use with this child?
14	How can I keep my own composure when working with the child?
15	How should I sequence instruction for the child?

Note. The rank of one represented the most frequently encountered consultation issue with teachers.